

Item No. 8.	Classification: Open	Date: 19 September 2017	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title:		Petition from Southwark Group of Tenant Organisations (SGTO) – Keep the Repairs Line Free	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Proper Constitutional Officer	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the cabinet consider a petition from Southwark Group of Tenant Organisations (SGTO) requesting to “keep the repairs line free.”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. A petition containing 500 signatures or more maybe presented to the cabinet. A petition can be submitted by a person of any age who lives, works or studies in Southwark. Petitions must relate to matters which the council has powers or duties or which affects Southwark.
3. At the meeting, the spokesperson for the petition will be invited to speak up to five minutes on the subject matter. The cabinet will debate the petition for a period of up to 15 minutes and may decide how to respond to the petition at the meeting.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

4. A petition containing 610 signatures (as at 4 September 2017) has been received from SGTO.
5. The petition states:

“Keep the Repairs Line Free

We the undersigned petition the council to reinstate and keep the freephone number for housing repairs.

We think that this change is unfair and will hit Southwark's most vulnerable tenants and residents the hardest.

Tenants and residents already pay for the repairs service through rents and service charges, and should not be charged twice to access such an essential council service.

The change will also create difficulty for tenants and residents who do not have access to the internet, such as the elderly and those with health complications. Having to pay to call up the repairs line will create barriers for people on pay as you go tariff who simply cannot afford the costs of waiting to have their call answered.

The average wait time for the call centre in February was 2 minutes and 40 seconds. If a caller is charged 55p per minute to make the call, they will be paying around £1.50. The longest wait time was for 48 minutes: here the caller would be charged £26.40. This is a cost that residents simply cannot afford.

The SGTO is also concerned about the council's drive to push residents into accessing services online more generally. Whilst most tenants and residents may not have any trouble using these online services, we are concerned that many people, particularly vulnerable people, risk being 'left behind' through not being able to access them. It is these people who rely on Council services the most who will be hit the hardest, and the change from the 0800 to the 0300 number illustrates this."

Community impact statement

6. The Southwark constitution allows for petitions to be presented by members of the public and can be submitted by a person of any age who lives, works or studies in Southwark.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Strategic Director of Housing and Modernisation

7. Customers can call the council's contact centre or order a repair on-line. Our repairs service telephone line, 0800 952 4444, is free to residents but the cost is borne by the council's HRA fund. It is used by council tenants and leaseholders to report their property repairs issues. 0800 numbers are known as "Freephone" numbers. They have been free to call from both landline and mobile phones since 1st July 2015. While calling a Freephone number is "free" to the customer, the cost of the call is borne by the organisation that owns the number.
8. The cost of providing the present 0800 number is about £65K per annum. This is the first year that the National Rent Reduction of 1% kicks in, which the recent budget report estimates will cost the housing revenue account (HRA) £62.5m by 2020. Whilst this financial contribution is welcome, it isn't the main reason for seeking to cease the 0800 number.
9. It's really important that people think about getting on-line if they haven't already done so. We know that people who are on-line and use electronic service and methods of communication tend to be better connected with friends and family and may be better off because they can access better deals on goods and service. It is also a great benefit to those who are housebound or have limited mobility as it provides easy access to service providers, not to mention the ability to skype people they may otherwise not see. We want to make sure Southwark citizens aren't left behind. The council is investing heavily in the delivery of training for those who are currently digitally excluded. In 2017 our libraries will deliver over 5,000 training packages to those in need of on-line training.
10. We will of course maintain telephone services for those with an emergency or who are vulnerable and have no access to on-line services. Freephone numbers would encourage the use of the telephone when our strategy for future service delivery, is one of digital access where that is appropriate. By ceasing use of a Freephone number, we hope that this will encourage customers to go on-line.
11. A survey of some of our neighboring boroughs reveals the telephone numbers they have adopted for customers reporting repairs.

	Housing	Emergencies
Lambeth	020 7926 6000	020 7926 6666
Greenwich	020 8921 8900	020 8854 8888
Tower Hamlets	0800 376 1637	
Bromley	020 8464 3333	0300 303 8671
CityWest Homes (Westminster)	0800 358 3783	
Croydon	0208 726 6101	
Hackney	020 8356 3691	020 8356 2300

12. 0300 numbers are charged at the same rate as calling a local 01 or 02 number. They are non-geographic numbers so the rate will be the same wherever you are calling from.
13. The table below looks at the likely cost of a call at the wait times quoted in the petition, with the addition of the average “handle time”, that is the average length of the conversation with the officer.

	PAYG cost p/min	12 min 40 sec	58 min
EE	£0.44	£5.57	£25.52
Virgin	£0.35	£4.43	£20.30
Vodafone	£0.30	£3.80	£17.40
Lyca Mobile	£0.12	£1.52	£6.96
Talk (via Vodafone)	£0.10	£1.27	£5.80
Tesco Mobile	£0.08	£1.01	£4.64
ASDA Mobile	£0.08	£1.01	£4.64
Three	£0.03	£0.38	£1.74

Average Cost	£2.37	£10.88
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14. From the above it is clear that the cost of a PAYG (pay-as-you-go) call varies significantly. Residents can minimise the cost of calls, not only to the repairs line, but also to many other public sector and other organisations, by shopping carefully for the best deals.
15. The plan is to roll the new number out over period of time, possibly over a 18-month period. We will promote the new 0300 number in preference to the 0800 number. The 0800 number appears on a lot of literature, posters, the sides of our contractor vans and will take a while to identify and remove.
16. We can monitor the take up of the new number and the level of continued use of the old number. That will enable us to choose when to turn off the 0800 number for good.
17. The risk might be that customers will be reluctant to call to report a legitimate repair. They will still be able to report repairs on-line for free.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Petition from SGTO online	Online	
Link: (copy and paste into browser) http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/mgepetitionlistdisplay.aspx?bcr=1		
Cabinet procedure rule 2.13 on petitions	160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH	Paula Thornton 020 7525 4395
Link: (copy and paste into browser) http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s67579/Committee%20Procedure%20Rules%20March%202017.pdf		

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Everton Roberts, Principal Constitutional Officer	
Report Author	Paula Thornton, Constitutional Officer	
Version	Final	
Dated	6 September 2017	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments sought	Comments included
Strategic Director of Housing and Modernisation	Yes	Yes
Director of Law and Democracy	No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Governance	No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		6 September 2017